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ABSTRACT

The potential advantages of bilingual educational programs for Spanish-speaking students in South Texas are discussed in this paper, which gives data on the academic achievement among Spanish-surnamed children in Texas. The paper covers both the traditional solutions to the academic difficulties of these students and bilingual education as an alternative approach. Also, the rationale for bilingual education is given with regard to its effect on educational retardation and the child's attitudes, the home, and the economic benefits. The national and state policies on bilingual education and preliminary data on the Region One Bilingual Project are included.

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RATIONALE FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH TEXAS

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RATIONALE FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH TEXAS

Academic Achievement Among Spanish-Surname Children in Texas

Approximately 1.4 million Spanish-surname children are enrolled in public schools in the Southwest.* Over 36% of these children are enrolled in schools in Texas. The Governor's Committee on Public School Education issued a report in 1969 which indicated that 55% of the Spanish-surname students in Texas drop out of school. In contrast, 29% of the Anglo students drop out of school prior to graduation. Statewide projections indicate that by 1974-75 the percentages of dropouts will be "reduced" to 50% for Spanish-surname students and 24% for Anglo students.

Data on the public school population of the seven counties in Region One reveals that 83% of the students have Spanish surnames. School population figures released by the Texas Education Agency show that in 1969-70 there were 16,558 children in grade one, while there were 10,583 in grade nine and 6,150 in grade twelve. Since the school population has been relatively stable within the region for the past decade, these figures would indicate that approximately 64% of the pupils graduate from junior high school and only 37% graduate from high school. Furthermore, a 1966 elementary school survey of approximately 70% of the elementary school students within Region One indicated that 29% of the students were one year over-age in grade and an additional 17% were two or more years over-age in grade. Similarly, the study indicated that 33% of the students were one year behind grade level in reading skills and 14% were two or more years behind.

These data are not really surprising to public school personnel in the Southwest because they reflect a problem which has been known for several decades. The low achievement levels of Spanish-speaking chidren have been well documented in the professional literature. Educators have consistently identified the Spanish-speaking students' lack of facility with the English language as the primary reason for their failure in the schools. School personnel have traditionally considered Spanish-speaking children to be educationally disadvantaged or handicapped and have directed their efforts toward fitting them into the mold of the school as rapidly as possible. The magnitude of the failure of this approach is reflected in the number of over-age students at each grade level and the high percentage of dropouts prior to graduation.

Traditional Solutions

Traditional solutions to the academic difficulties of Spanish-speaking students have included ethnic isolation, punishment for speaking Spanish in school, retention in the early elementary grades, and placement in special education programs. These solutions are based on an often unrecognized assumption by the schools that meaningful instruction can occur only in English. The logical conclusion of this assumption is that the Spanish language has no place in the schools and simply interferes with the educational process. Therefore, the first job of the schools is to suppress the students' use of Spanish and teach them English before starting the actual instructional process. The goal is to move these students from monolingual Spanish speakers to monolingual English speakers (at least within the school setting) as rapidly as possible.

* The five states which constitute the Southwest are California, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona.

The result of the "cut all cultural ties and Anglicize" approach to instructing Spanish-speaking students has been a high percentage of what might be described as school-damaged children. Educators have only recently become aware of the psychological damage which can result from the suppression of students' native language and culture.

> Probably the most damaging thing to the self-concept of the bilingual has been the widespread practice in the Southwest of prohibiting Spanish-speaking students to speak their native dialect within the school grounds and within the classroom. This has been done in the name of teaching these students to speak in English and to reinforce their learning of English. The results have been generally that the students soon learn that Spanish is the language of deviancy and that to be a Spanish-speaker is to be by that very fact an object of differentiated treatment. (Ulibarri, p. 9)

By denying the Spanish-speaking child's language and ignoring his cultural background, educators have created a chasm between home and school. The child is expected to speak English and conform to the values of the teacher while he is at school. His family expects him to speak Spanish and conform to the values of the home when he is not at school. The inability of many Spanish-speaking children to bridge this chasm is reflected in their school record of failure and in dropout statistics.

Bilingual Education--An Alternative Approach

The failure of traditional educational programs to provide satisfactory educational experiences for Spanish-speaking children has led many educators to re-examine the assumptions underlying the school curriculum. It was previously noted that the major assumption of the traditional approach to teaching Spanish-speaking students was that meaningful instruction could occur only in English. From the point of view of the student, this assumption was untenable. The educational record of the non-English speaking countries of the world demonstrated the obvious--that students could learn in a language other than English. However, the assumption was based not on the ability of the students to learn, but rather on the belief that the schools could not (and should not) teach in a language other than English. That point of view was justified by the fact that curriculum materials and teacher competencies required for instruction were available in English but not in Spanish. When this lack of curriculum materials and training in Spanish was coupled with the philosophical orientation that instruction in a language other than English is somehow "unAmerican", no alternative was acceptable or indeed, possible. In this context, the assumption that meaningful instruction could occur only in English was valid.

However, with the enactment of the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), the development of coordinated curriculum materials in English and Spanish has begun. There are now several bilingual education programs available to interested school districts. Consequently, the assumption that meaningful instruction can occur only in English can no longer be blindly accepted. Educators in each school distruct must analyze the needs of their students and decide whether bilingual education is appropriate for them.

The Rationale for Bilingual Education

Proponents of Bilingual Education point out that in the case of Spanish-speaking children, the question of whether the schools should teach only in English or in both English and Spanish is not a question of fostering bilingualism where none existed before. Which ever course the schools select, the students will become bilingual, and the bilingualism cannot be eradicated by law, wishful thinking, or school policy. The real question is whether bilingualism is to be an asset or a liability to the student. If it is to be an asset, the schools will capitalize on the students knowledge of his native language to present instruction while teaching him to speak a second language. On the other hand, if bilingualism is considered a liability, the mother tongue will be either ignored or actively suppressed, and all instruction presented in the second language.

The acceptance of bilingual education signals a distinct change from the traditional attitudes which have prevailed in the schools. The educator who installs bilingual education in his school is, in effect, saying that the job of the school is to refine and perfect those assets a child already has, and to add those that he needs but does not have. Bilingual education is generally considered to serve five positive purposes for the child and the school:

1. It reduces the educational retardation which occurs when a child is required to learn through a language which he does not command.

2. It gives the child the opportunity to experience immediate success in his educational endeavors.

3. It helps to establish a closer tie between the parents and school, thus avoiding the prospect of alienating the student from either the school or the home.

4. It projects the child into an atmosphere of acceptance within the school and fosters reinforcement of his self-worth.

5. It provides the opportunity for the child to become literate in two languages, thereby offering additional opportunities for cultural enrichment and economic gain.

Effect of Bilingual Education on Educational Retardation. Bilingual education is based on the assumption that students with a mother language other than English will, at least in the initial stages of their formal education, learn most efficiently in the mother tongue. Bilingual education provides Spanish-speaking children the opportunity to learn educational concepts in their mother tongue as they learn English. Most Spanish-speaking children have the physical and mental skills necessary to learn to read when they enter school. However, if they have little or no facility in the English language, they are unlikely to learn to read with any degree of skill in English. These same students can be taught to read in Spanish because they already have the prerequisite linguistic skills in that language. Even so, the schools are often reluctant to present the initial instruction in Spanish. There seems to be an undercurrent of fear among educators and parents that initial school instruction in Spanish will retard the children's rate of learning of English.

Research data, although sparse, does not support this fear. In fact, there is some preliminary evidence that prior knowledge of reading in Spanish may assist the student in learning to read in English. In addition, there is ample evidence of young children's ability to learn two or more languages at the same time.

Effect of Bilingual Education on the Child's Attitudes. Rather than being faced with the overwhelming task of learning to speak another language as soon as they enter school, students in bilingual education programs begin to receive instruction in their native language while learning English as a second language. In this way, Spanish-speaking children have an opportunity to experience success in the initial phase of their school experience. Gudschinsky has described the potential effect of this early success on the students' subsequent school career:

> School failures and dropouts are often blamed on a long history of failure which has led to an expectation of continued failure. The child who fails completely in his early schoolwork is unlikely to become a great success later. Such early failure is inevitable for a large percentage of children who enter a school taught in a language they do not know. In the bilingual schools, however, the child is conditioned to success, not failure. Learning to read and write in his own language is relatively easy for him, and this early success leads him to expect--and to obtain--success in the more difficult transition to another language. (Gudschinsky; pp. 349-50)

Bilingual Education and the Home. When children from a home where Spanish is the mother tongue enter the traditional school, they are immediately confronted by a new language and a different value system. At school they usually receive the message (covert or overt) that their home langauge and background is detrimental to their school success. Similarly, the parents may reinforce the students' belief that their background is somehow inferior and must be abandoned. On the other hand, the parents may express pride in their cultural heritage and the Spanish language and demand that the children develop a similar pride. In either case, there is a chasm between the home and the school and little communication is likely to occur. The children are caught in the middle, bound by family ties to one language and culture and bound by law to another. Bilingual education programs, by accepting and incorporating the language and culture of the home, are in a position to establish a common bond of respect and cooperation between the parents and the school. One of the most consistent findings of schools with bilingual programs has been the development of closer ties between the home and the school.

Economic Benefits of Bilingual Education. Bilingual education programs offer both the Spanish-speaking student and the English-speaking student a unique opportunity to learn a second language at a time when second language learning is most effective. However, even educators who view bilingual education as a vehicle to assist Spanish-speaking students in making the transition to an English language based curriculum often see little benefit in continuing to teach these students in two languages once the transition has been made. Yet many of these same educators vigorously support foreign language programs in their junior high and high schools. Bruce Gaarder, former Chief of the U.S. Office of Education's Modern Language Section, pointed out this dichotomy during hearings conducted by a Senate subcommittee on bilingual education:

> We spend, and I believe I could document it rather easily, at least a billion dollars a year on foreign language instruction at all levels. Yet virtually no part of it, no cent, ever goes to maintain and further develop the native language competence which already exists in American children. It is as if one said it is all right to learn a foreign language if you start so late that you really cannot master it. It is all right for headwaiters, professional performers, and the rich to know foreign languages. But any child in school who already knows one is suspect. It is more than an anomaly. It is an absurdity that, as they say, passeth understanding.

If bilingual education fulfills the expectations of its developers, students who enter school speaking a language other than English will be considered advantaged rather than disadvantaged students in terms of their language development.

Region One Bilingual Project - Preliminary Data

The Region One Bilingual Project, funded by USOE, is in its fourth year of program development. Since the first year (1969-70) was primarily directed toward initial program development activities, pilot testing was restricted to a single classroom (15 students) in Lamar Elementary School in Edinburg, Texas. In April, 1971, the nine remaining students from the original experimental group who had completed all of the three year sequence of programs in the Bilingual Project were tested along with seven students who had entered the Bilingual Project in first grade and four who had entered in second grade. A control group, consisting of nineteen students who entered Lamar elementary school at the same time as the experimental students (1969) were also tested. Test administered included the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, a test of creative writing, a Spanish Reading Test (Inter-America Series - Level I), the Spache Reading Test, and the California Achievement Test. Results of the tests indicated that the students in the experimental group had lower median pre-test scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. However, on the post-test, they had higher scores than the control group. The experimental group also had higher median scores on the Spache Reading Test and the test of creative writing in English. On the Spache Reading Test, given during the seventh month of the second grade (2.7), the experimental students had a median grade equivalent of 4.6 on word recognition, 2.8 on reading comprehension, and 3.3 on comprehension of orally read material. In contrast, the control students had median scores of 3.0 on word recognition, 1.8 on reading comprehension, and 2.8 on comprehension of orally read material. Finally, the experimental group had a median grade equivalent of 3.5 for vocabulary and 2.8 for reading comprehension on the California Achievement Test.

Additional evidence of the effectiveness of the Region One Bilingual Program is derived from annual evaluation reports submitted to the United State Office of Education. These data indicate that both first year and second year students in the project scored significantly higher than comparable control groups on a test of English sentence structure. Furthermore, results of tests developed by project personnel showed that these students could read in both English and Spanish at the criterion levels established by the project.

National and State Policies on Bilingual Education

Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law by President Johnson in 1965, gave national endorsement to bilingual education as a viable educational alternative for students with a limited knowledge of the English language.

The law, supplemented by P. L. 90-247, provides funds for

(1) planning and development of bilingual programs - including research projects, pilot developmental projects, and the development and dissemination of special instructional materials for use in bilingual education programs.

(2) Pre-service training designed to prepare teachers, teacher-aides, and related school personnel for participation in bilingual education programs.

(3) Establishment, maintenance, and operation of bilingual programs - including acquisition of necessary teaching materials and equipment.

In addition, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act established a National Advisory Committee on Education of Bilingual Children. The Act, as modified by P.L.90-247, states that the committee will have fifteen members, seven of which must be educators with experience in bilingual education.

The State of Texas has also developed regulations and policies concerning bilingual education. H.B.103, signed into law on May 22, 1969, provided that local school districts could determine the grade levels and circumstances under which bilingual instruction could be given. It also stipulated that any bilingual instruction above the sixth grade had to be approved by the Texas Education Agency. The Texas Education Agency has in turn set forth its goals for bilingual education in Texas public schools ahd has delineated a list of five priorities for implementation of bilingual education programs. First priority is given to children entering school for the first time who speak little to no English. Second, third, and fourth priorities are given to students in primary, middle-upper elementary, and secondary grades respectively, who have not mastered the English language. Fifth priority is given to language development in English and Spanish for students who have mastered English (either native English speakers or native Spanish speakers).

Conclusions

The potential advantages of bilingual educational programs for Spanish-speaking students have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs. However, these programs are not panaceas for all the educational problems of Spanish-speaking students. Even after the language barrier is removed, these students will still have many educational problems just as monolingual students do. Furthermore, the installation of a bilingual program is not a decision to be taken lightly, because it requires investments other than money. Such a program requires staff competencies which may not be readily available. It also requires a change in attitudes concerning the background and abilities of the Spanish-speaking student. A bilingual program which is simply purchased and "plugged in" to the classrooms should not be expected to compensate for inadequate teacher training or inefficient administrative procedures. Under these circumstances the program is doomed to failure. Bilingual education offers the school an opportunity to capitalize on the linguistic background of Mexican-American students and make it an asset rather than a liability. However, the program must have full support and cooperation from both teachers and administrators if it is to succeed.

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